

Without new government, Belgium faces threat of break-up

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Political tensions in Belgium continue to mount as the country nears six months since the general election without a new government.

Regional parties are seeking to use the crisis as leverage for their separatist political demands, increasing expectations that the country will be broken apart at some point. Some press commentators are openly saying that a new (Dutch-speaking) country—Flanders—is in the process of being born.

A counter-demonstration of 25,000 to 35,000 was organised last month, calling for Belgian unity to be maintained. A petition to this effect, drafted by a civil servant and endorsed by the trade unions, has secured around 150,000 signatures. The relatively small nationalist protest was predominantly Francophone, though about a third of those in attendance were Dutch speakers. Many waved national flags, before gathering at the arch that marks Belgium's independence from the Netherlands in 1830 in Cinquenaire Park to sing the national anthem.

Press headlines describe attempts to form a government as descending into “vaudeville.” Sections of the ruling class are becoming extremely anxious about the continued delay. A Central Bank spokesman warned this week of the financial implications of failing to reach an agreement. Although the outgoing government of Guy Verhofstadt has remained in place as caretaker, it has no power to set new budgets. Guy Quaden expressed concern that projected budget surpluses of €2.5 billion (US\$3.7 billion) may not be realised because of the crisis. The bank was forecasting a 0.2 percent surplus on GDP next year, which had been offset for the needs of an ageing population.

On the evening of December 3, King Albert II went so far as to entrust outgoing Prime Minister Verhofstadt with the task of forming a new government in talks with all the parties.

Belgium, with a population of around 10.5 million, is being torn apart by the explosion of competing interests between regionally based bourgeois elites and their petty bourgeois hangers-on. Flanders, the Dutch-speaking north of the country, is richer than French-speaking Wallonie in the

south. There is also a small German-speaking population in the east. Brussels (a French-speaking city in a Dutch-speaking province) is accorded separate linguistic status.

Voting is organised by language parties, who then organise into coalitions to form the national federal government. There are no national parties, although parties have counterparts in the other language regions. June's general election was won by an alliance of the right-wing Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V), under Yves Leterme, and the moderate Flemish-nationalist New Flemish Alliance (NVA). Leterme was charged with forming a new government.

The negotiations floundered primarily on the question of a further extension of Flemish regional autonomy. Across the whole country, Christian Democrats and Liberals took 81 of the 150 parliamentary seats—enough to form a government, but not enough to effect the constitutional change required to extend autonomies.

The present situation is the end result of the continued renegotiation of federal powers and extension of regional autonomy over the last 45 years.

Prior to the 1960s, Flanders was still predominantly agricultural. The country's wealth was concentrated in Wallonie, at that point the centre of heavy industry and the industrial working class. But Wallonie was devastated by the collapse of the industrial base, as Flanders became a centre for new technologies. Flanders now accounts for around 60 percent of GDP, compared to 24 percent from Wallonie. Unemployment in the south is roughly double that in the north.

Flemish separatists, like the extreme-right Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest—formerly Vlaams Blok), want to split the country along its language border to end the tax subsidies to the south. The escalating political crisis has seen VB's positions becoming part of the political mainstream. Despite their ostensible opposition to VB, other Flemish parties have tail-ended their separatist and anti-immigrant policies.

Two weeks ago, Leterme (who himself campaigned on extending regional autonomy) proposed a two-year “convention” to discuss devolving powers from the federal

government to regional authorities. His proposal was to draft constitutional reforms over the next year whilst still leaving the government free to pass other legislation. This was rejected by his own party, and by his election coalition partners. The CD&V insisted that the incoming government must commit in advance to further autonomous powers over taxation, health and transport to prevent the convention stalling.

The NVA, emboldened by the crisis, said that the convention would simply delay or water down devolution of power, and that they could obtain no mandate from their members for it. They were concerned that the convention did not guarantee regional control over social and economic measures such as the possibility of lower business taxes and the creation of a Flemish social security system.

The proposed convention did win support from the CD&V's Walloon sister party, the Democrat Humanist CDH (formerly Christian Democrat). Party leader Joëlle Milquet, who was previously attacked in the Flemish press for her resistance to Leterme's proposals, said that she was satisfied the convention would provide "enough safeguards to reinforce the [Belgian] federation."

Walloon politicians are generally more in favour of the national federation than their Flemish counterparts. One particular concern is that any division would have a devastating impact on money coming into the region. At present, some 15 percent of Walloon regional income comes from federal taxes. Francis Delperee of the CDH told Dutch-language television, "We have always demanded that social security remain a federal responsibility."

The negotiations appear to have got beyond this point. The CD&V proposed a concentration on social economic and budgetary issues to prevent the talks breaking down again, but this was rejected out of hand.

It was against this background that the civil servant from Liège, Marie-Claire Houard, launched her petition online demanding an end to wasting money on "quarrels that interest only a small minority" and calling on the government to "respect our nation and its unity."

The November 18 demonstration through the centre of Brussels that it prompted marched under the slogan "For the Unity of Belgium." The organisers called for no political banners, although a number of Walloon politicians, including Milquet, Socialist Party (PS) leader Elio Di Rupo, and representatives of the Greens and Liberals were present. No Flemish politicians were seen. Banners proclaimed their support for King Albert II, a constitutional monarch, whose role in this crisis has been to encourage Leterme in the formation of a new government. Bart de Wever, head of the NVA, was likened to Slobodan Milosevic by some banners.

The petition being advanced by the trade unions

counterposes national unity not only to separatism, but to the class struggle. It states that "The solidarity between the richest and poorest citizens, just as the solidarity between the richest and poorest regions, are the props of our Belgian society." Such a bankrupt perspective offers nothing to the majority of Belgian people—French, Dutch, and German-speaking—one in seven of whom live on or below the poverty line, according to a recent survey.

The crisis in Belgium cannot be resolved under the existing political system, which has itself created the nationalism, regionalism and inequality we see today.

The divisions between Flemish and Walloon workers were in fact promoted by the trade unions and their supporters in the radical parties. After their betrayal of the 1961 general strike, a section of the Francophone trade union bureaucracy argued that Walloon workers (then the most advanced and militant) were being held back by their Flemish counterparts.

The right-wing trade unionist André Renard, who had played a critical role in sabotaging the strike movement, channelled the frustrations of the Francophone workers into the Walloon Popular Movement. This fought for the federal state, the impact of which can now be seen. In 1965, three years after Renard's death, a separate Walloon Party of Workers was formed, effectively cutting Walloon workers off from their Flemish counterparts.

Only a socialist programme can unite Belgian workers, not just across language barriers within Belgium but across the entire continent in the struggle to establish the United Socialist States of Europe.



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